

A story is told of a man who walked over to a little league baseball game happening in a park one afternoon. He approached the dugout and asked one of the young players what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing, my team is losing." "Wow," the man replied, "you must be discouraged!" "No," the boy replied, "we haven't even batted yet!" That young baseball player had hope and this illustration proves, as all baseball fans from Chicago know, that hope really does spring eternal.

Hope comes up a lot when we talk about religion, and God, and all that Christian stuff, but do we really know what we're talking about? What does it mean to hope? What does having hope actually look like? In the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Hebrews, the chapter after the one from today's Scripture, the author of the letter tells us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the assurance of things not seen." To have faith is to be assured that our ultimate hopes will be realized; faith knows that God's promises will be fulfilled, whatever the odds might be.

The problem with all of the hope talk so rampant in religious circles these days is that most religious people, including most Christians, don't actually have hope. There's a whole lot of people singing songs, lifting up prayers, and nodding to their heads to sermons this morning that don't actually believe a word of it. They like the words they sing and they hope there's a God hearing their prayers and the sermons all sound nice, but there's a disconnect between their physical actions and their mental convictions.

I know this is true because I'm young, naïve, and idealistic. I have the audacity to believe the world can change a bit. I woke up this morning thinking that millions of kids don't have to die each year of preventable disease. I have this crazy idea that we can provide every person in this country with adequate health care and that we shouldn't care what their immigration status is because God wants people to live, not die. I'm ignorant enough to run around Illinois trying to throw corrupt and unconcerned politicians out of office because I think public servants should actually serve the public. People call me clueless because I insist the church has the potential to be less hypocritical, less self-interested, and less motivated by material interests.

Thankfully I'm only 24, there's lots of time for me to learn how things really work. Christians are constantly quoting Jesus and telling me the poor will always be with us, so we should stop trying to help them. Conveniently, this also allows rich people to keep all their money without feeling guilty - because that's what Jesus would do. Our culture has some really catchy slogans like "nothing ever changes" or "always has been, always will be" or "all everyone cares about is themselves." Putting these slogans on bumper stickers would be a fantastically successful church fundraiser because everyone would want to put their favorite saying on their car next to their Jesus fish.

This is a despairing, cynical, dark world and the church is completely caught up in it. The church reflects it, embodies it, and refuses to challenge it. The church complains and laments that nobody comes to church anymore, but we don't realize that nobody comes to church anymore because they can hear people complaining and lamenting at home! Ardent and militant atheists write books claiming that religion is angry and destructive and religious people respond with anger and hate. People feeling overwhelmed, hurt, and exhausted from life walk into church looking for healing and

relief, but the church gets inflicts more harm on them for sitting in the wrong pew and increases their weariness by asking them to serve on four different committees.

Christians respond to cynicism and despair not by offering authenticity, integrity, and hope, but by crafting larger and more elaborate idols. “My co-workers are mean, but if I can just get that job I applied for everything will be okay.” Then the job comes and the new co-workers are just as terrible as the last one. “If our church can just build that new building then more people will come.” “If only our last minister hadn’t left or If only we could find a new minister, then we wouldn’t have to listen to this young, naïve, and idealistic kid.” “If we start a contemporary service then younger people will starting joining the church.” So, the church builds a new building and starts a contemporary service, except the pews are still empty and the congregation is still old, but now the church has lots of new debt and some really bad music on Sunday morning. This is the Gospel truth about idols, we look to them for fulfillment, deliverance, and transformation and they always disappoint. We put our hope in people, money, a new job, or a new location and these things always, always, always throw us right back into despair. None of this works...none of this works!

The truth within the Christian story is based on hope and hope is the power of the Christian message in a cynical world. The moment we lose hope we lose the Gospel. The minute we join everyone around us in anger and despair we become slaves to the God of determinism. When we decide things haven’t, can’t and will not change then things never can and never will change. Then tomorrow can never be different than today; right now is all we have and right now is terrible, so things will always be terrible. This is the truth our culture drills into us over and over again. Life is terrible, but you can forget how terrible it is for just a minute if you buy the right clothes, watch the right movie, drive the right car, eat at the right restaurant, and use the right deodorant. Then when the clothes wear out, and the movie ends, and the car breaks down, and the food digests, and the deodorant wears off, life will be terrible again.

This is not the Christian witness though. Christianity, at its best, proclaims the radical hope that the world can change for the better. Our faith tells us that tomorrow can be different from today. It just takes a little hope.

This is the message I take away from this passage in Hebrews. Scholars debate why this passage was written, but it is clearly written to a community in spiritual crisis. The author is pleading with the letter’s recipients to remember Christ’s message and mission. The author wants to remind the readers that God has transformed their lives and this transformation holds real significance for they way they think and act in the world. Perhaps the audience of Hebrews was getting anxious about the consequences of their faith. They might have been facing persecution for their beliefs and some were wanting to stop following the demands of this new faith so the persecution would stop. Or maybe they were growing weary of the stories told to them about Jesus and the promises made to them about God. They were ready to give up because they didn’t think the stories were true and or believe the promises would ever come true. Whatever the reason, the author is exhorting them to remain faithful. The writer wants them to remain hopeful, not despairing.

As justification for this continued hope, the author asserts God’s faithfulness. The 23<sup>rd</sup> verse is one of my favorite in all of Scripture, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who has promised is faithful.” When I read this, my

eyes instantly focus on the words “hold fast.” The NIV translates the word fast as “unswervingly.” “Let us hold unswervingly to the faith we profess.” I hear the word “unswervingly” or the words “hold fast” and I instantly think “roller coaster” or “gigantic and unavoidable bump on the interstate when you’re flying down the road at 80 miles-an-hour in a car without any shocks.” The words “hold fast” scream trouble. They shout out a warning: this is about to get real messy and you need to a firm grasp to overcome what’s about to happen. These words present a challenge and they indicate turmoil. Reading this passage is like watching a James Bond movie: Jesus 002 (that’s a Trinity reference for those fans scoring at home). I’m serious though...these words remind us that life is not easy but we believe in and worship an awesome and faithful God. Adversity is not evidence for the falsity of faith or reason for giving up one’s beliefs; it is the moment when the power of hope overcomes the forces of despair.

I’m not asserting that we should be blindly optimistic or uncritically positive about everything that comes are way. There are times of frustrations and unpleasant moments in our lives. Evil is a reality within the world and bad things do happen. I’m making the claim that when evil shows up and bad things happen is when we depend the most on our ultimate hopes. Having hope is easy when everything is going well, but when the ability to hope when everything and everyone around you indicates your optimism is futile is the true test of our deepest convictions. When faced with hatred we must stand firm in our convictions that love overcomes. When faced with terrible words, actions, and events we must hold steadfast to our belief that good will win. When faced with the ugly effects of violence we must remain committed to the idea of a peaceful world. We must hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the God who promised is faithful.

Now we don’t claim this hope because it feels good or because it makes life easier. Christianity is not a self-help book and Jesus is not a self-esteem guru. The Gospels do not contain the seven habits of highly effective people. We claim this hope because our story tells us its true and our faith tells us its real. We claim this hope because God led the Israelites out of Egypt, because God helped David defeat Goliath, because God was incarnated in a manger, because God was crucified on a cross, and because God left the tomb empty. We claim this hope because God has redeemed all of us and transformed this world. We claim this hope because God’s Kingdom is coming. We claim this hope because peace has defeated war, justice has eradicated injustice, and life has overcome death. We’re living in an “already done” world. Not only can the world become a better place, but we Christians have this foolish idea that it already is. We might be young, naïve, and idealistic, but we’ve got Gospel hope and we need to hold steadfastly to it. We’re sure of what we hope for and we’re certain of the things we don’t see.”

There’s a quote I love from Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners. He writes that “hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being changed.” REPEAT. If all we do is read these words and stories from our Bibles without actually believing in their power and truth, then we’ve got nothing but some entertaining nonsense. But when we start believing these ideas, we’re in for a real crazy ride. When we start living the faith we’re professing the world’s going to look like a radically different place. When we embody Jesus’ message, there’s a whole group of cynics out there who will come flocking into our churches. We live in a nation and world

facing a huge spiritual crisis. This is a country and globe hungering for passion, vitality, and authenticity, but they haven't found it in the church. Like bad food reheated in the microwave, the church has been preaching a Jesus from the 1960's. The moment we realize and repent our failures is the moment revival starts. The first step to church growth isn't found in an evangelism book, flashy worship service, or beautiful church building. It comes from an intentional community of passionate believers seeking God, spreading joy, and living hopefully. The church must be a community of hope in a world of despair.

I don't have a whole lot to say this morning and I'm not asking you all to do very much. My request is simple and my demands are few. Let's change history. Let's transform the world. Let's hold fast to the hope we profess without wavering, for God is faithful. Join me in being a little more young, naïve, and idealistic. Amen.